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AUTHOR Byer, John L.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of actively involving students in a social studies methods class on instructor evaluations given by students. Subjects were 30 undergraduates who were all elementary education majors except for one special education major. Subjects (27 female and 3 male) ranged in age from 21 to 53 years old. The experimental method involved students of two social studies methods classes (one taught by a passive instructional approach, the other by an active instructional approach) filling out course and instructor evaluation summaries that were distributed by the College of Education and Psychology. Findings were that students from the methods class taught by an active instructional approach gave the instructor statistically significant higher mean rankings on the questions of instructor's ability to promote understanding of principles underlying the subject matter and instructor's performance compared to other instructors' performance than the mean rankings given by students to the instructor of the passive methods class. Findings suggest that instructional approaches that actively involve social studies methods students in creatively utilizing course skills may advance students' involvement in the course and students' evaluations of instruction of the course. (Contains 2 figures of data and 9 references.) (Author/BT)

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Students' Responses to Active Instructional Approaches in a Social Studies Methods Course

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by John L. Byer

Teaching Assistant and Doctoral Student

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

The University of Southern Mississippi

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John L. Byer

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Abstract

This research investigated the effects of actively involving students in a social studies methods class on instructor evaluations given by students. The subjects were thirty undergraduates who were all elementary education majors except for one special education major. Twenty-seven of the subjects were female and three of the subjects were male. The subjects ranged in age from twenty-one to fifty-three years of age. Twenty-eight of the subjects were Caucasian and two of the subjects were African-American. The experimental method involved students of two social studies methods classes (one taught by a passive instructional approach, the other by an active instructional approach) filling out Course and Instructor Evaluation Summaries that were distributed by the College of Education and Psychology. The findings were that students from the social studies methods class taught by an active instructional approach gave the instructor statistically significant ($p < .05$) higher mean rankings on the questions of instructor's ability to promote understanding of principles underlying the subject matter and instructor's performance compared to other instructors' performance than the mean rankings given by students to the instructor of the passive methods class. The conclusion is that instructional approaches that actively involve social studies methods students in creatively utilizing course skills may advance students' involvement in the course and students' evaluations of instruction of the course.

Today's instructors of social studies methods courses may encounter problems with demonstrating useful classroom applications of the course content and skills to aspiring elementary educators. Furthermore, many elementary education instructors concur that undergraduates need opportunities to apply new teaching methods under simulated classroom conditions. (Pugh, Stone, Lindlow & Pryor, 1991).

Offering elementary education majors opportunities to creatively apply teaching methods to simulated classroom conditions may encourage the elementary education majors to become intrinsically interested and actively involved in learning and applying social studies teaching methods. Dewey (1933) contended that students' alert curiosity is promoted by encouraging them to utilize previously learned information for the solution of new problems. Grannis (1970) applied Dewey's approach of encouraging students to use previously learned information to solve new problems. After presenting education majors with a model of teaching performance, teacher education instructors using the micro teaching approach encourage students to recreate the teaching performance for a small group during a short duration. Students' recreations of teaching performances modeled by college instructors are videotaped. Students who recreate teaching performances are videotaped. The videotapes are played for the student and the small group that experienced the recreated teaching performance. After watching the film of his/her attempt at recreating a teaching performance and listening to comments from group members, the education major gets an opportunity for a second attempt to recreate the teaching performance that was modeled by an instructor of teacher education (Grannis, 1970).

Borrowing in part from Grannis's micro teaching approach, the active teaching approach examined in this article actively involves teacher education majors with collaboratively thinking

to plan teaching/learning activities and materials for the purpose of teaching objectives based on state-mandated core objectives in social studies for grades one through eight. This article's purpose is to quantitatively analyze students' evaluations of social studies methods instruction according to an active instructional approach compared to students' evaluations of social studies methods instruction according to a passive instructional approach.

The active instructional approach described in this article involves students in actively thinking to devise teaching/learning scenarios and materials to apply teaching methods such as simulation, cooperative learning, or demonstration to objectives they deduce from state-madated core objectives. The aspiring elementary educators become actively involved in creatively applying teaching methods to the material they will soon teach. According to Dewey, (1933) active student involvement in devising approaches to solve realistic and authentic problems encourages student involvement and interest in course work. The active instructional approach described in this article also involves students in cooperative sharing of ideas about how to devise teaching/learning scenarios and materials for teaching objectives. According to the noted educational theorist Johann Herbart, social interactions among students in cooperative leaning situations may promote apperception or increased mental comprehension of course skills. (Cubberly, 1920) This active instructional approach attempts to apply Herbart's apperception principal by encouraging aspiring elementary educators to mutually remember and apply previously learned skills as a means of mutually increasing their skills in creatively implementing social studies methods such as dyadic role playing, drill, and discussion to course skillst. By getting students to creatively devise teaching scenarios and materials for teaching objectives with social studies teaching methods, the active instructional approach described in this article offers

students opportunities for creative involvement and personal rediscovery of course content by encouraging them to innovatively apply the teaching method demonstrated by the instructor to their teaching of an objective. According to Piaget, (1970) opportunities to creatively apply and personally rediscover course content piques student involvement in courses.

In contrast, the passive instructional approach consists primarily of lecture, films, and cooperative learning that allows little leeway for active student thinking to devise approaches for utilizing corse skills. This author taught a social studies methods course according to the passive instructional approach one semester and then taught a social studies methods course according to the active instructional approach during the following semester. This article quantitatively analyzed students' evaluations of instruction of the two respective courses.

Background

The two social studies methods courses were taught at a deep-South state university that educates approximately twelve thousand students. The active methods course described in this article represents the collective work of a teaching assistant and education professors who discovered approaches for improving the social studies methods course after one semester.

The Course

Curriculum and Instruction Elementary 305 (CIE 305) is a three hour credit course that acquaints students with state-mandated core objectives, cooperative learning, teaching methods and their tangible applications, multi cultural education and using childrens' literature to teach social studies. The instructor of the passive methods course and the active methods course taught the following semester is a doctoral student with middle school teaching experience, experience as a college instructor, and teacher certification in secondary social studies.

The Active Methods Course

Revisions that led to the active methods course were based on feedback from students who completed the passive methods course and feedback from experienced professors of education. Students in the passive methods course lacked sufficient opportunities to practice and discuss the social studies teaching methods and material presented in the course. Lectures, films, and cooperative learning that allowed little independent student leeway to creatively apply course skills characterized the passive methods course. Theoretically grounded in Dewey's (1933) support for involving students in creatively applying course skills to solve real problems and Piaget's (1970) support for involving students in creatively applying course skills, the active instructional approach for teaching social studies methods emerged. Quantitative analysis of students' evaluations of instruction of the passive instructional approach and the active instructional approach tests Wilson and Readance's (1993) finding that opportunities to creatively apply social studies teaching methods advanced intrinsic student interest and involvement in the course.

Description of the Active Instructional Approach

Step one of the active instructional approach begins with the instructor modeling a social studies teaching method by lecture and demonstration. Social studies teaching methods that were taught included dyadic role playing, simulation, discussion, demonstration, drill, and cooperative learning techniques such as Student Teams Achievement Division, and Jigsaw I among others. After having explained the teaching method, the instructor demonstrated the teaching procedures and materials necessary for classroom implementation of the teaching

method. The students listened, watched, took notes and asked questions.

In step two, students applied the teaching method to their micro teaching of an objective they deduced from a state-mandated social studies objective. After having devised an objective to micro teach, students devised teaching procedures, activities, and materials for implementing the teaching method under simulated classroom conditions. Based on prior knowledge, notes from the instructor's demonstration of the teaching method, and their own innovative ingenuity, students developed written lesson plans that detailed their procedures, activities and materials for applying the teaching method to teaching their objective.

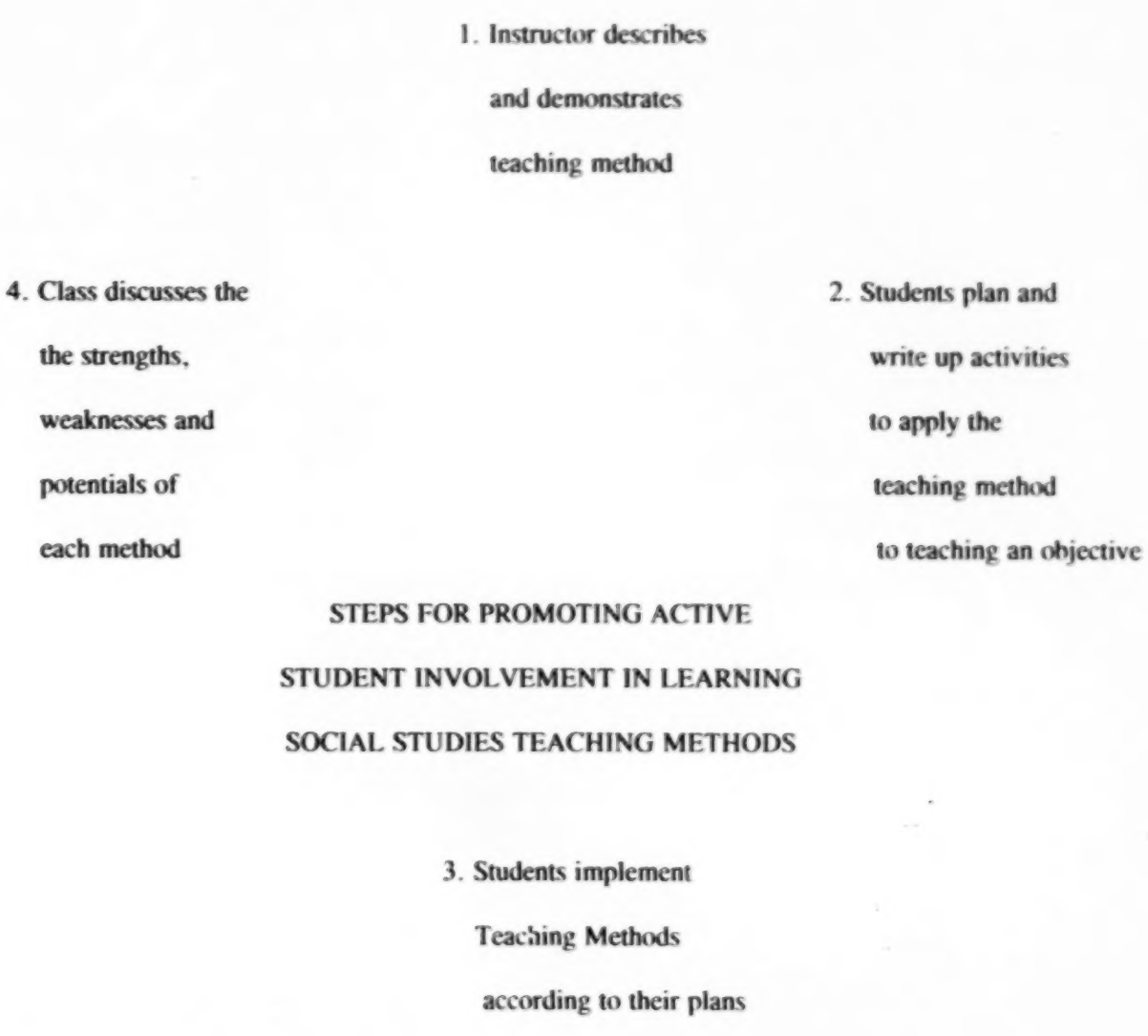
In step three students actually micro teach their objective to classmates using the teaching method, activities, and materials detailed in their lesson plans. The relatively small number of students in the class taught by the active instructional approach made it possible for students to micro teach to the entire class. Students authentically practiced being elementary school teachers by teaching according to the use of a teaching method, student activities, and materials to teach an objective. Students extensively utilized maps, globes, and hands-on materials for geography and history instruction. Students received written and oral feedback from the instructor concerning their development and implementation of teaching methods developed in their lesson plans. Teaching methods learned and applied included cooperative learning methods, dyadic role playing, simulation, demonstration, discussion, lecture, questioning and drill.

Step four involved students in discussion the strengths, weaknesses and potentials for each method. In addition to discussing the overall possibilities for each teaching method's classroom utilization, students discussed their feelings about utilizing each teaching method in relation to their beliefs, personalities and experiences. Preservice teachers' beliefs, personalities, and

experiences influence the extent to which social studies methods classes influence teachers' beliefs and teaching practices (Johnson, 1990). Figure one visually depicts the four-step procedure for implementing the active instructional approach for teaching social studies methods.

Figure one illustrates a four stage process that involves the elementary education majors who are enrolled in social studies methods classes in authentically applying useful teaching methods to the teaching of central course content and skills. Stage one involves the instructor with using , visual diagrams, transparencies, maps, and globes in order to describe and demonstrate each teaching method. After explaining the rationale and purposes of a teaching method, the instructor demonstrates the teaching method. The instructor facilitates students' notetaking on clear, step-by-step procedures for implementing the teaching method in class. Step two encourages active student thinking and creativity by giving students flexibility to deduce their own objective from their chosen social studies core objective. Active student involvement and innovative ingenuity is further encouraged by giving students flexibility to devise appropriate teaching/learning activities and materials for teaching their objectives to classmates. Step three offers aspiring elementary educators opportunities to actually teach their classmates a brief social studies lesson. Step three, in which students micro teach a lesson to the class, provides teacher-education majors with firsthand experience with teaching and initiating learning activities. During step four, class discussion of the strengths, weakness, and, potentials of each method, students get opportunities to assess how useful the teaching method appears to be for their teaching. Different students describe their personal reactions to what they perceive as the suitability of the teaching method to their teaching.

Figure 1. Procedures for Implementing the Active Instructional Approach for Teaching Social Studies Methods Classes


1. Instructor describes and demonstrates teaching method
2. Students plan and write up activities to apply the teaching method to teaching an objective
3. Students implement Teaching Methods according to their plans
4. Class discusses the the strengths, weaknesses and potentials of each method
STEPS FOR PROMOTING ACTIVE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN LEARNING SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING METHODS

Compared to student involvement and interest in the passive methods class, student involvement and interest in the active methods class improved greatly. Figure two is based on statistical comparisons between student evaluations of the instruction of the passive methods class and student evaluations of the instruction of the active methods class.

Subjects

The subjects for the study were all enrolled in CIE 305 in either the instructor's passive methods class or the instructor's active methods class. The subjects consisted of thirty students. Twenty-seven subjects were females and three subjects were males. The subjects ranged in age from twenty-one to fifty-three. Twenty-eight subjects were Caucasian and two subjects were African-American.

Instrument

The instrument used to measure students' evaluations of the instruction of CIE 305 taught according to the passive and active instructional approaches was the College of Education and Psychology's Course and Instructor Evaluation Summary. Student responses to 7 of fourteen questions that appeared to be most indicative of students' appraisals of instruction were selected for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Responses of the students in the passive methods class to the instructor evaluation summary and responses of the students in the active methods class to the instructor evaluation summary constitute this study's dependent variable. On each of seven selected questions, students may rank the instructor's performance as either good, average, fair, or poor. Thus, the dependent variable is measured in ranked data. Two groups exist, students' evaluations of instruction in the passive

methods class and students' instructor evaluations in the active methods class. The Mann-Whitney U test is the appropriate test.The rejection criteria for hypothesis testing is $p < .05$.

Theoretical Justification for Hypothesis

According to Dewey, (1933) active student involvement in devising approaches for using course skills to solve real problems promotes intrinsic student interest in course work. The active methods instructional approach described in this article involves students in authentically devising approaches for using teaching methods to teach social studies courses. Johann Herbart's approach of promoting comprehension and involvement in lessons by encouraging students to socially interact about course material (Cubberly, 1920) was adhered to by the active instructional approach for teaching social studies teaching methods. Students in the active methods class had opportunities to socially interact about their lesson plans with learning partners. Opportunities for students to creatively apply and personally rediscover course content advances students involvement in lessons (Piaget, 1970). Opportunities to creatively apply social studies teaching methods to realistic classroom situations advances students' involvement and intrinsic interest in lessons (Wilson & Readance, 1993). Students who are actively involved in creatively applying skills learned in social studies methods classes to teach objectives are likely to have a more positive impression of their instructor's teaching than students who received less opportunity to creatively apply social studies teaching methods to teach objectives.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is being tested. Students in the active methods class will give their instructor more higher-ranked course evaluations compared to course evaluations given by students to the instructor of the passive methods class.

Figure 2. Comparisons of Students' Evaluations of Passive and Active Instruction for CIE 305

	Passive Instruction	Active Instruction	
1. Instructor's class presentation	14.63	19.00	p = .24
2. Instructor's organization for delivery	14.88	18.00	p = .23
3. Instructor's ability to promote understanding of principles underlying the subject matter	13.63*	23.00*	p = .008
4. Instructor helps with academic problems	14.25	20.50	p = .06
5. Instructor establishes a climate which invites students' questions	13.96	19.00	p = .09
6. Instructor's ability to pursue stated course objectives	14.38	20.00	p = .08
7. Instructor's performance compared to other instructors' performance	13.13*	25.00*	p = .002

* = $p < .01$

n = 30

Findings

As figure two demonstrates, the students' evaluations of the instructor of the active methods class were significantly higher than students' evaluations of the instructor of the passive methods class on the questions of instructor's ability to promote understanding of principles underlying the subject matter and instructor's performance compared to other instructors' performance. This evidence provides empirical corroboration for Wilson and Readance's (1993) finding that opportunities to actively and creatively apply teaching methods learned in social studies methods classes to realistic classroom situations piques student interest and involvement.

Written comments from students' evaluations from the active methods course also improved in comparison to written comments from students' evaluations of the passive methods course. Written comments from students in the active methods class include the following statements.

> This class has been wonderful. The teacher not only discusses the strategy, but requires us to turn around and do the strategy. I enjoyed this class.
>
> He gave us classroom time to work on the strategies he taught.
>
> This was helpful to me as a teacher-to-be.
>
> The instructor is the first teacher that actually came down to my level and made me understand the information. He explained the material thoroughly.

Discussion

Students are intrinsically motivated to engage in learning activities that clearly improve their capacities to pursue their goals of being effective teachers (Dewey, 1913). Interested and highly involved students in the active methods class gave their instructor correspondingly higher mean rankings. However, factors other than differing instructional approaches may have contributed to

differences in student evaluations of the passive methods instructor and student evaluations of the active methods instructor. The active methods instructor had one more semester of elementary teacher-education experience than the passive methods instructor. The active methods instructor also taught a smaller class than the passive methods instructor. Possible differences in the demographic composition of students in the active and passive methods classes constitute another limitation of results obtained from comparing the respective two classes evaluations of their instructor.

Major potential for improving instructional effectiveness could develop from continued statistical analysis and comparisons of students' responses to statements that permit them to evaluate their instructors' effectiveness. Measuring instruments that measure students' evaluations of their college instructors may be rendered increasingly reliable and effective by statistical comparison of instructors' evaluations.

Continuing development of the social studies methods course could benefit by following McKee and Day's (1992) recommendations for utilization of classroom journals for students' reactions to each class session, development of an integrated teaching unit, and field experiences that include observing social studies classes. McKee and Day (1992) also recommended that students complete journals detailing classroom activities and materials and their personal reactions as approaches for improving a social studies methods course.

Further improvements in the elementary social studies methods course may result from including field experiences in public schools, an integrated unit plan, and discussion and reflection among aspiring teachers about what they perceive as the usefulness and applicability of each teaching method. Continuing experimentation and dialogue directed toward improving social

studies courses holds promise for promoting continued advancements in education programs.

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